

# UEI History And Overview Of Program Elements

## Urban Communities in New England Before the Urban Environmental Initiative (UEI)

Prior to the implementation of the UEI pilot program, urban residents were not actively engaged or informed of environmental protection decisions made by the agency. The focus of environmental protection efforts largely sought to improve environments and ecosystems outside of urban areas rather than restore and revitalize the environment in urban cities. The traditional foundation of the agency is to implement a series of prescriptive federal regulations that sets and enforces specific air, water, land, and cleanup standards. There was insufficient data

to verify or understand the extent of environmental degradation in urban areas. Since EPA didn't have adequate information about urban cities and did not have or maintain a regular connection with the urban constituencies, it is not surprising that there was also a lack of dedicated resources to address urban environmental and public health issues, nor a coordinated response to public and community concerns. Any progress made in urban areas was primarily a response to a crisis and not part of an ongoing, coordinated effort.

The UEI was created as a response to two prior efforts. Lead was the first issue to result from a risk prioritization effort in EPA New England and

predominantly affected children in urban neighborhoods. This environment and public health crisis in New England compelled management to dedicate time and resources to work in urban areas. In 1993, the region began to address the issue of environmental justice. The link between poor conditions in urban areas and environmental health concerns became evident through input from urban constituents. The need to restore and revitalize urban areas as a part of improving the health and quality of life of residents was clear, and the time was ripe for the UEI to launch. The foundation of UEI's philosophy, mission, and approach to problem solving is grounded in four key program elements.

## Program Element 1: Focused Mission & Objectives

The UEI was the first coordinated effort in EPA New England to respond to these problems and help connect urban residents to resources that improve the environment, public health, and quality of life in the cities of Boston, MA; Providence, RI; and Hartford, CT. The UEI approach and model is a new way of doing business in urban areas at EPA New England, and takes public service and community based environmental protection to a new level that consistently involves, engages and responds to public concerns. The UEI listens to community needs and concerns, identifies projects that meet community priorities, and leverages resources to implement projects in order to fulfill our mission and facilitate measurable results.

The primary objectives to support this broad mission are:

- Restore and revitalize the environment of urban neighborhoods and improve public health.
- Build local capacity to assess, address, and resolve environmental problems.
- Promote sustainable economic development that does not compromise environmental quality and public health.

## Program Element 2: Community-Based Decision Making & Setting Priorities in Urban Neighborhoods

The UEI pilot program focuses on six environment and public health issues identified and prioritized in a series of community focus groups at which urban residents were asked to identify



*Chelsea youth learns firsthand how waste and pollution contaminate urban rivers.*

their greatest concerns and problems. Although public health was a fundamental concern, results from the focus groups demonstrated that the connection between environmental quality and public health was not always apparent and/or clearly understood by urban residents. Therefore, a central goal of the UEI focused on helping both urban residents and EPA New England make the connection between environmental quality and public health and do it in a way that ensured high public accountability for successes and failures. EPA programs have not traditionally helped build public capacity to understand and resolve problems, but the UEI made this a cornerstone of the pilot program.

The primary environmental and public health issues that the UEI pilot program addresses are listed below:



*East Boston and Chelsea youth learn how watersheds work from a UEI team member on Earth Day.*

- Lead Poisoning Prevention:** Reducing and/or eliminating exposure to lead poisoning through education and outreach, sampling, and clean yard initiatives.
- Indoor Air Quality:** Reducing incidence of asthma and asthma triggers including carbon monoxide and tobacco smoke, integrated pest management techniques or systems.
- Ambient Air Quality:** Promoting alternative transportation, reducing particulate levels, greater use of cleaner technologies in urban industrial areas.
- Urban Rivers/Wetlands:** Conducting shoreline cleanups, increasing the number of trees, improving foliage and planting, a river bank restoration, and revitalization.
- Urban Vacant Lots:** Creating urban gardens & agriculture, returning vacant lots to productive use, creating pocket parks, remediating or mitigating contamination, trash clean-ups, and preventing pollution and illegal dumping.
- Openspace/Greenspace:** Returning openspace to productive greenspace in densely paved areas, remediation or mitigation of contamination, trash clean-ups, and preventing pollution and illegal dumping.

These issues have grounding in existing EPA federal regulatory requirements and prioritize public health concerns which are of primary importance to urban residents.

### **Program Element 3: UEI Program Staff**

Critical to the continuing success of the program is a diverse team of staff with varied and complimentary skills. The UEI consisted of five full-time staff (a Regional Team Leader; 3 City Program Managers (CPM); Grant/Youth and Environment Coordinator) and part-time intern level staff that serve as Special Project Coordinators. The UEI staff require skills in addition to science and engineering such as strong oral and written communication, creativity, facilitation, problem-

solving, crisis management, project management, and the ability to work with a minimum of management oversight and as a cohesive and dynamic team. All staff must be able to represent EPA at external functions and community events and serve as internal champions for projects and the UEI pilot program. Staff must also be able to work successfully with a range of diverse stakeholders and build credibility and trust with community partners.

The CPMs serve as primary public and internal contact points for each of the three target cities and act as technical advisors; resource brokers; grant managers; and advocates for urban community stakeholders in their target city. Stakeholders include local

neighbors and residents; state and local government; elected and appointed local officials; industry; non-profit organizations; medical establishments; other federal agencies; environmental groups; and academia. Involving all stakeholders in environmental decision-making is a critical element of the bottom-up approach to community-based environmental protection. The CPM reviews and administers grants across EPA programs (i.e. Environmental Education, Environmental Justice, and UEI); leveraging internal technical resources (i.e. soil sampling, risk assessment analysis, education resource tools); and developing effective partnerships that can lead to sustainable and measurable improvements on target issues. Other responsibilities include:

**Public Awareness & Education:** Providing information, training, and technical assistance to stakeholders on a wide range of urban environmental and public health issues facing the community including, but not limited to: lead poisoning, asthma, urban rivers, indoor and ambient air quality, greenspace and openspace, and urban vacant and contaminated lots.

**Building Community Capacity & Consensus:** Providing communities with tools, information, and training that build local capacity to make sustainable improvements and changes in urban environmental quality and public health.

**Partnerships & Coalition-Building:** Facilitating successful and long-term partnerships and coalitions between stakeholders with common concerns, and leveraging these partnerships into resources to support projects.

**Grant Awards & Management:** Awarding and managing multi-media EPA grants across all agency programs—including UEI Community Grants Program, Livable Communities Grant Program, Environmental Education, Environmental Justice, and others.

**Leveraging Available Resources:** Securing sampling, Pollution Prevention, or other Community-Based Environmental Protection Grants in urban areas, sharing information and materials through public education campaigns, securing translation services, donating outdated agency computers to local organizations, connecting non-profit organizations with available EPA or other federal grant program guidance, providing expert technical assistance to stakeholders.





*Community leaders in Hartford, CT receive funding during press event through the UEI Community Grants Program.*

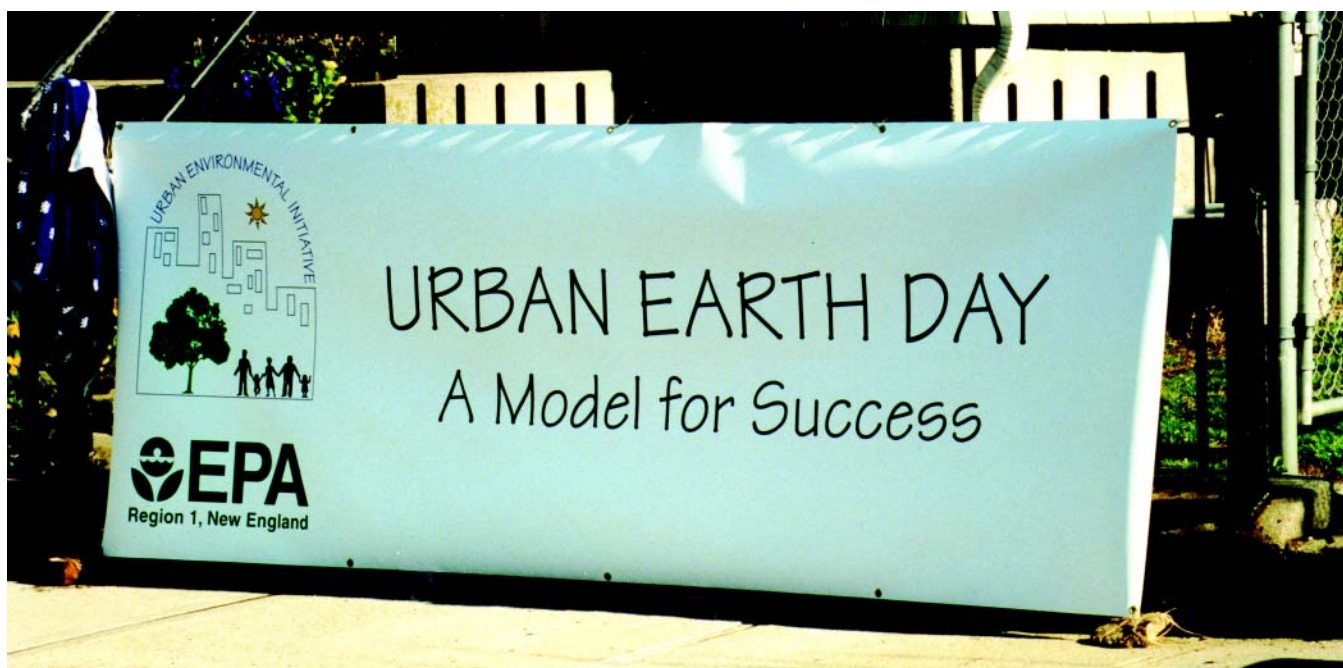
#### **Program Element 4: Dedicated Funding Resources**

A critical component to UEI work is securing and awarding dedicated funding resources to service community partners and support projects in targeted urban cities. In 1996 the UEI initiated a Community Grant Program to direct funding resources to the most critical environment and public health issues facing residents in the three target New England cities. Projects must pertain to the six issues identified as priorities by the UEI and leverage

resources from other sources. Applicants with the strongest proposals incorporate a multi-media approach into the project design.

In 2000, the UEI joined forces with the Livable Communities Program in EPA New England and issued a joint Request for Proposals to encourage leaders from urban, suburban, and rural areas to work in partnership to improve the quality of life for residents throughout New England and help communities develop or redevelop

smartly and sustainably. The Livable Communities program strengthens urban communities, make suburbs more livable, and invest in rural economies. Proposals from urban, suburban, and rural areas or regional proposals that link these areas were urged to apply for approximately \$150,000 in competitive grant funding. This effort was a great success, and marked another step to increase internal integration of programs and better leverage resources to achieve measurable results.



*A banner celebrating EPA and UEI's participation at Urban Earth Day in Providence, RI.*